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Tokenism

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Tokenism in political discourse has two distinct meanings. First, if we choose to view politics broadly, that is, in terms of the *pattern of outcomes* (material and otherwise) generated by a particular society, *tokenism* is defined as the practice of satisfying the *moral requirement* for the inclusion of members of structurally disadvantaged people in groups that are better placed in society. This maintains the idea that *social mobility* is available to all when it is not. Second, if we limit our definition of *politics* to those institutions and practices that are designated as the specifically political, set against civil society and the family, *tokenism* is defined as the practice of appeasing or *placating* a demand for a particular course of action. This act of placation is generally perceived as both instrumentally unsatisfactory and morally inadequate.

Overview

In everyday parlance, the word *token* has no intrinsically negative connotations and the meanings attributed to it are quite diverse. A token is often an *artifact,* representative of another object or a system of relationships. For example, the physical forms that money takes —notes, coins, checks, shells—are tokens of particular quanta of value. Similarly, a token can be an artifact representative of relationship between particular individuals and can symbolize, for example, enduring affection (a lock of hair, a wedding ring) or indeed animosity or a portent of ill tidings—the "black spot" in Robert Louis Stevenson's novel *Treasure Island,* indicating the receiver would soon meet his demise. Equally, the word *token* can be used to describe an action or gesture. For example, one might attend an event (a wedding, a funeral) as a token of one's relationship to the betrothed or the deceased.

However, if we change the word from *token* to *tokenism*, lift it out of everyday language and place it in the lexicon of the social sciences (sociology and politics in particular), *tokenism* has overwhelmingly negative connotations. The definition of *tokenism* presented here is divided into two main sections. The first provides an account of tokens and tokenism as it has developed in the literature of sociology, by focusing on the work of Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1977). This discussion is set against the backdrop of a broad understanding of politics as the *outcomes* generated by a particular society—or in the words of Harold D. Lasswell (1936), "who gets what, when and how." The second section explores the way that the idea of tokenism is understood in the political arena, that is, in the institutions and practices that are concerned with the exercising of authority in society more generally. In order to arrive at an understanding of tokenism, it is juxtaposed against both symbolism and realism in political language.

Sociological Theories of Tokens

Sociological theories of tokenism ought to be understood as being informed by their antecedents in the social theory developed by the classical sociologists of the 19th and early 20th centuries. In particular, the theory of tokenism as it was explored and debated in the late 1960s and 1970s was concerned, in a very similar way that both Émile Durkheim and Robert K. Merton were, with the relationship between morality as an element of the social fabric of society social structure and the possibility of social mobility. However, unlike the broadly functionalist account of Robert Merton and very much in tune with the *critical intent* of much writing in the 1960s and 1970s, theories of tokenism describe it as a mechanism by which inequalities are unjustly maintained in modern capitalist patriarchal and White-dominated societies.

Building on the theoretical groundwork set down by Merton and drawing on the work of the Swiss sociologist Georg Simmel, the American sociologist Rosabeth Moss Kanter developed a numerical theory of token-dominant behavior. Kanter was interested in the varying effects that different *proportions* of people had on particular societies, wherein their differences were defined by their "master status"—sex, race, and ethnicity, for example. Kanter's is a theory of group behavior based upon proportionality of dominant groups to less dominant groups in any population (whether this be a nation-state, a workplace, or a social club) particularly the relationship between "dominants" and "tokens."

For Kanter there were four different types of populations: *uniform*—comprising one type of person only, *skewed*—characterized by a large preponderance of one group over another (approximately 85:15 proportionally), *tilted*—wherein the ratio is around 65:35, and *balanced* populations, exhibiting a ratio of between 60:40 and 50:50. It was the second type of group —*skewed*—that particularly interested Kanter, principally because a variety of different populations in society exhibit approximately this ratio, particularly (but not exclusively) where men form the numerically dominant group and women are the tokens.

It is important to recognize that while Kanter focused on the sociological effects of proportions when examining the interrelationships between men and women, equally she argued that the sociological effects of proportionality could be generalized. In other words, patterns of dominant-token behavior were not dependent upon the *master status* of either group. Rather, the type proportionality in all populations will influence the dynamics of group behavior in that population in predictable ways.

Turning to Kanter's particular interest in the relationship between tokens and dominants, Kanter's theory of tokens comprised three propositions. First, to be labeled a *token* (whether this is an individual or a group of people) inscribed a status as a *symbol* of that group. Second, Kanter argued that a specific *dynamics of tokenism* are likely to operate, particularly when the master status of the tokens is obvious (women in a male-dominated group; Black people in a White-dominated group, etc.) and when the presence of the tokens in the group is new. In these circumstances, tokens are *more visible* (and the numerically less they are the more visible they are). Third, the presence of tokens reinforces the features of the dominant group and as such *polarizes* dominants against tokens while at the same time essentializing the particular characteristics of individuals in the token group into a stereotypical portrait of "the token."

To test the validity of this general theory, Kanter studied the sales force of a U.S. company, the population of which was approximately 300, within which there were about 20 women. This study revealed three patterned behaviors. First, due to their visibility the token women experienced a range of *performance pressures* including an increase in demands to publicly prove their worth and the need to emphasize their achievements despite fear of retaliation if a token woman performed better than her male dominants. Against these performance pressures token women reacted in two patterned ways—either overachieving to prove their worth or seeking invisibility (leading to the generalization that women are intrinsically nonaspirational or fear success).

The second patterned behavior identified by Kanter was *boundary heightening.* The male dominants exaggerated their own culture (especially in the presence of token women, with stories of sexual and sporting prowess, for example) and reminded token women of their (essential) differences. They also "quarantined" token women from particular occasions and

tested the loyalty of tokens to the dominant culture. This latter element of dominant-token relations is particularly important: Frequently dominants may ask tokens to renounce an essential element of token culture in order to reinforce the validity of the dominant culture over token culture. Kanter cited the example of women on the sales force behaving in male-like ways and making fun of stereotypical (token) women traits. In response to this patterned situation, tokens can either accept the isolation from both the dominant and token groups or continually seek to prove their loyalty to the dominant culture *and* endure the charge that they have betrayed their token group (whether this be based on gender, ethnicity, or social class).

The third set of patterned dynamics Kanter labeled *role entrapment.* This plays out in two ways. First, based on their essentialized characteristics, the status of tokens is often taken to be *other* than what it actually is. In Kanter's study, sales force women were assumed to be secretaries, yet the phenomenon of misidentification could apply in a host of other settings to (a Hispanic man in a university who is assumed to be a cleaner rather than an academic, for example). Second, tokens can be ascribed a series of caricatured roles *and only these.* Again, Kanter's examples are specific to her study: Following a general Freudian line of reasoning, men characterize women as *either* Madonnas or whores (the "mother" or the "seductress") and the roles that are ascribed to these types—for example the mother token is assumed to be emotionally intelligent, while the token seductress may introduce behavior of sexual competition and jealousy between male colleagues and be the object of resentment when advances are rejected or be labeled a *whore* when they are. Again, this role entrapment is generalizable across other populations characterized by dominant-token ratios, and in all cases tokens are thought of as only occupying particular roles. The possibility of mobility—either upward or downward—is constrained by these caricatured roles.

Kanter argues that it is easier for tokens to conform to caricatured roles rather than challenge them, and that this is so in large part because of the numbers: in effect, 20% or less renders change difficult and even when tokens succeed they do so at a personal cost, having to expend extra effort, being isolated from both the dominant and token groups, such that genuine tokens—people of a nondominant group that actually succeed—are rare.

This leads to two generalizable points about tokens that are reflected in other studies. First, the main role of tokens within society is to act as a symbol that mobility—particularly upward mobility—is possible. Second, because of this, once a particular population has in place a token—or even several tokens—it makes it harder for other individuals with the same master-status traits to achieve this status.

Modern sociological literature concerned with tokens and tokenism reflects these two general characteristics of the phenomenon. For example, Judith Long Laws makes both these claims in her discussion of the *careers* of token women academics, inclusive of the observation that the relationship between a particular token and the dominant group will often be mediated by a *sponsor.* In his discussion of children's participation in democratic political process for the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Roger A. Hart discusses the *tokenism* of placing children (often well-spoken and attractive) on deliberative panels without ever intending to seriously take into consideration their views. In their work published in *Social Forces,* Pamela B. Jackson, Peggy A. Thoits, and Howard F. Taylor (1995) examined the psychological well-being of 167 African Americans occupying elite positions. Their respondents reported feelings of isolation despite experiencing multiple demands on their time—serving on committees, panels, and policy sessions, for example—due to their token status.

However, from a structural perspective, the principal function of a token is to maintain the

belief that upward mobility is possible. A very clear example of this is provided in Dana Cloud's 1996 study of biographies of U.S. talk-show host Oprah Winfrey. Cloud cites one appreciative account of Winfrey's career:

> The journey of Oprah Gail Winfrey from Hattie Mae's pig farm in Mississippi to the pinnacle of wealth, power, and success in American television is a journey we must all admire…. She is the ultimate American success story. That a tiny, illegitimate black girl from dirt-poor Mississippi can transform herself into the richest and most powerful black woman in the world is a triumph of the human spirit and the American dream. (Mair, 1994, p. 349, quoted in Cloud, p. 115)

Cloud emphasizes that this portrayal of the American Dream (the same discussed by Merton) as achievable, alongside other representations of the possibility of material success (Stephen Spielberg's film *The Color Purple* and popular television sitcom *The Cosby Show,* for example) belie the reality of socioeconomic inequality in the United States when measured by income and ethnicity.

To summarize, if we define politics in terms of the pattern of outcomes (material and otherwise) generated by a particular society, *tokenism* is defined as the practice of satisfying, or placating the moral requirement for the inclusion of structurally disadvantaged people in groups that are better placed in terms of the outcomes of a particular society, thereby maintaining the idea that this mobility is available to all individuals when in fact it is not. We now move to the second understanding of tokenism. We have also seen that according to Kanter tokenism plays out in particular ways in the relationships between dominants and tokens in particular group settings, again with the effect of holding out the possibility of upward mobility yet denying it to all.

Tokenism and Symbolism in Politics

Many social scientists—such as the sociologists discussed above, for example—might object to the identification of a specifically political realm, or field of behavior, arguing that all events ought to be understood as political in the broad sense deployed above. However, just as sociologists worked to define (and refine) their field of inquiry, political scientists lay claim to a specific realm, namely the institutions and practices of politics set against other areas of society, the economy and the family, for example.

The most salient form of tokenism in the specifically political realm is precisely the same as the broader phenomenon of tokenism but found in politics. For example in 2014, the (then) prime minister of Great Britain, David Cameron, was accused of "female tokenism" by the Conservative MP Richard Drax when he appointed two junior women ministers to cabinet. In 2004, following the announcement that Barack Obama would run for the U.S. Senate as a Democratic candidate for the state of Illinois, the Republican Party was accused of "the politics of tokenism" in appointing their own African American candidate, Alan Keys, in the same state.

However, tokenism in politics can be defined as having a more general rhetorical utility than that denoted in the meaning thus far described. By setting the concept of tokenism against the more general concept of symbolism, this more general utility is revealed.

In his discussion, Jeff Archer makes four claims about symbolism in politics. First, understood as the practice of imparting myths and symbols, symbolism is overwhelmingly important and

can even be seen as a necessary precursor to political action. Second, symbolic political messages are affective and can be profoundly so—think here of the ideational political politics of belonging involved in nationalism or any other powerfully expressed political ideal. Third, symbolism in politics necessarily demarcates between one set of ideas and practices—its own —and those which are not. Fourth, in the thrust and parry of political contestation (whether this be democratic contest or otherwise) opposing forces continually deploy symbols and myths when quite a lot of the time they claim to be using only facts and reason. We will return to this claim immediately below. Nevertheless, the point in this context is to emphasize the *pervasiveness of symbolism* in politics as put forward by Archer.

Understood in this sense, it is possible to read political symbolism into any artifact or event. Even if we confine ourselves to symbolism in the specifically political arena identified above, examples still abound. A multitude of artifacts project meaning beyond their mere physical form: Lenin's Mausoleum in Red Square in Moscow is not merely the place where Vladimir Lenin's body is housed but invokes the spirit of Soviet communism; similar observations can be made about the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor or Nelson's Column in London's Trafalgar Square. Further, political rhetoric can be just as symbolic and just as pervasive. For instance, John F. Kennedy entreating, "My fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country" can be understood as profoundly symbolic of American politics at the time. Moreover, a particular act can be seen as broadly symbolic of greater events. For example, the signing of the Trans-Pacific Partnership in 2015, a trade deal involving 12 countries centered on the Pacific Rim, can be seen as profoundly symbolic of global economic integration—although whether or not this is a good thing is open to dispute.

Against the pervasiveness and importance of symbolism, we can define *tokenism* as the practice of appeasing or *placating* a demand for a particular course of action. Further, it is important to emphasize that this act of placation is generally perceived as not merely unsatisfactory by way of its quantum or amount; it is also perceived as being morally inadequate. For example, in the Australian political context, the political interests of nonmetropolitan (rural, regional, and remote communities) have traditionally been represented by the conservative National Party (formerly the Country Party). In 2014, the metropolitan-based Australian Labor Party attempted to reinvigorate its support base in rural areas by holding a "Country Caucus." This act was labeled "tokenism" by the (then) head of the National Party, Warren Truss.

Finally, the delineation between symbolism on the one hand and tokenism on the other hand can be a fine one, but nevertheless extremely important. Thus, in his discussion of prosecutions at the conclusion of World War II, M. Cherif Bassiouni argued that to prosecute the few for the crimes of the many would, under most circumstances, be viewed as tokenism; but that due to their standing in the respective Nazi and Japanese regimes, the 22 individuals prosecuted at Nuremberg and the 28 individuals prosecuted at Tokyo were "appropriate symbols" at that time. This is despite the fact that in the case of the Tokyo trials, some that fell in the symbolic category, namely the Japanese emperor and his uncle, were excluded from prosecution.

See alsoDeviance and Control; Functionalism

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Further Readings

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